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Investigation of 2018 green-on-blue attack criticizes vetting of Afghan forces, praises actions of US riflemen

By **Kyle Rempfer**

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Advisers from the 2nd Security Force Assistance Brigade work with their Afghan counterparts during their 2019 deployment to Afghanistan. (Army)

The investigation into an [insider attack](#) near [Tarin Kowt Airfield](#), Afghanistan, on July 7, 2018, called into question the reliability of the vetting process for Afghan partner forces.

Many Afghan troops are not vetted at all, according to the investigative report, and those who are but fail the screening process are often not removed from formations quickly.

The investigation, which was only released to Army Times this month, also praised the quick actions of U.S. soldiers who were pulling security for their fellow troops from [1st Security Force Assistance Brigade](#), known as the “Guardian Angel” mission, during the incident.

As the attack unfolded, the Guardian Angels, or GAs, barricaded themselves and the advisers in an office building. Cpl. Joseph Maciel, 20, a 3rd Infantry Division rifleman assigned to the GA mission, died after sustaining multiple gunshot

wounds and grenade fragmentation. Two other GAs were also wounded.

The GAs “played an invaluable role in minimizing the number of casualties,” the investigating officer wrote in the report. Their “quick reaction to an unpredictable event allowed them to quickly consolidate to protect the [1st SFAB] members, recover the two injured GAs, secure their location until QRF arrived, and ensure the wounded individuals received first aid.”

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The insider attack was carried out by “at least one” Afghan National Army soldier “with no clear motive,” according to the investigation. How exactly the individual slipped through the Afghan military’s vetting process, if he was vetted at all, was redacted in the investigation.

“Through interviews, it was discovered that due to the amount of individuals to be vetted, it is not uncommon for an individual to not be vetted,” the investigation reads. “Additionally, it was found that if individuals fail the screening process, there is a significant delay in the time it takes the GIROA Ministry of Defense to take action.”

On the day of the attack, SFAB advisers were conducting an afternoon meeting at the headquarters of the 5th Kandak, 4th Brigade, 205th Corps, near Tarin Kowt Airfield. They planned to discuss logistics issues after leaving the U.S. portion of the base known as Camp Russell. The advisers had been working with the 5th Kandak since April 2018, and each SFAB soldier stated there had been a good working relationship, according to the investigation.

SFAB advisers had previously worn battle belts with SIG Sauer M17s, spare magazines and tourniquets. But Afghan National Army personnel “had raised a concern that the battle belts were indicative of a lack of trust amongst peers.”

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In order to establish good relations, the advisers ditched the battle belts and only wore pistols. While no advisers were wounded in the attack, downgraded equipment was a factor in the [death of an SFAB command sergeant major](#) in Logar province about two months later.



Cpl. Joseph Maciel died from wounds sustained in an apparent insider attack July 7, 2018, in Tarin Kowt District, Uruzgan Province, Afghanistan. (Army)

Inside the HQ building on July 7, 2018, three U.S. advisers met with the Afghan soldiers and discussed the Kandak's logistics issues. Roughly midway through the meeting, an explosion occurred outside, close to where Maciel was posted at the rear of the building. A fragmentary grenade had been thrown from a nearby barracks building, the investigation stated.

The blast was followed by sustained small-arms fire. One GA began yelling "Alamo" and "get in the building." From there, they called for a quick reaction force and posted security at the entrances. As they consolidated, they realized Maciel and another GA, whose name was redacted, were still outside.

During the opening salvo, Maciel and another U.S. soldier had been wounded by grenade shrapnel. The other soldier had attempted to signal his location to his fellow GAs, but he was shot through his tricep as he raised his arm to do so.

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The GAs attempted to recover their comrades but were immediately engaged by the attacker when they opened the outer door of the HQ building.

“At some point, at least one person attempted to enter the room where the GAs and advisers had established security. [One GA] pushed the door shut to deny entry,” the investigation reads. The soldiers told the person attempting to gain access that if they pushed on the door again, they would be shot. Shortly after this, the GAs put several rounds through the door to deter any further attempts.

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Meanwhile, two GAs climbed out of the window to recover their comrades still outside. After cresting the window, they saw an Afghan soldier standing with an AK-47. They ordered him to drop the rifle, and he complied. This Afghan soldier was not ultimately labeled as an accomplice to the attacker.

Maciel was not responsive when they recovered him. The other U.S. soldier who had been trapped outside, though wounded, could walk. They pulled Maciel by his body armor into the HQ building, applied tourniquets and waited for the QRF. It was later determined that Maciel had sustained a shattered femur and an injury to the base of his skull.

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Eight QRF soldiers were dispatched from Camp Russell. They moved by foot roughly 600 meters to the Afghan side of Tarin Kowt and then stopped to conduct a map check.

“While the team was stopped, a single gunshot was heard,” the investigation reads. “Members of the QRF saw an individual, dressed in an ANA uniform with an M-16 rifle and a grenade, fire at them.”

The QRF team shot back until the Afghan soldier fell and dropped his weapon. On the ground, the attacker reached again for his gun, prompting a final shot from the QRF team that “incapacitated” him, the investigation stated. The attacker was ultimately detained by other Afghan soldiers, ending the incident.



Troops of 3rd Infantry Division joined together in comfort and support of the mother and brother of fallen Soldier Cpl. Joseph Maciel during a Warriors Walk Ceremony Feb. 5, at Cottrell Field, Fort Stewart Ga. The Warriors Walk Inc., is a nonprofit organization, in conjunction with the 3rd ID that holds remembrance ceremonies in order to pay homage of fallen Soldiers who were killed in action while in Iraq and Afghanistan (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Devron Bost / released)

Maciel was pulseless and unresponsive when he ultimately arrived under the care of a surgical team at Camp Russell. Medical personnel gave him fresh blood and plasma and attempted cardiopulmonary resuscitation, but were never able to revive the young soldier.

After the attack, Taliban spokesman Qari Yosuf Ahmadi claimed the shooter acted alone, but said that the insurgent group “appreciated” his actions.

Officials from U.S. Forces-Afghanistan said they had nothing to add to the investigation into the July 2018 attack when reached for comment by Army Times. A year before the attack, the Afghan Ministry of Defense had signed a new “Force Protection and Insider Threat Policy” that U.S. officials said improved training and security procedures among Afghans and coalition service members.

There were four insider attacks against U.S. personnel in 2018, one in 2019 and one so far in 2020. Army SFABs continue to deploy to Afghanistan, with the 4th SFAB preparing to arrive this summer, despite the [ongoing troop drawdown](#).

“Those guys are out there, and they’re in exposed positons and it is a high-risk situation,” Gen. Mark Milley, then the Army’s chief of staff, said during an interview with The Associated Press after Maciel’s death. “So casualties are going to occur.”

Maciel’s home unit held a tree dedication ceremony last winter at Warriors Walk on Fort Stewart, Georgia, for the fallen soldier. Comrades who knew Maciel traveled from Fort Benning to meet with his mother and brother during the event.

“Maciel always had a never quit attitude, he went above and beyond to complete his missions,” said Staff Sgt. Eddie Negron, a [squad leader for Task Force 1-28](#), Maciel’s unit. “It feels as though someone took something special away from me, he was like my son.”

About [Kyle Rempfer](#)

Kyle Rempfer was an editor and reporter who has covered combat operations, criminal cases, foreign military assistance and training accidents. Before entering journalism, Kyle served in U.S. Air Force Special Tactics and deployed in 2014 to Paktika Province, Afghanistan, and Baghdad, Iraq.

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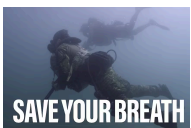
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